Something happened to me the summer of my 12th year that I've never been able to live down. My family refers to it as the " Riding Lawn Mower event," but I remember it as " The Nightmare."

I was visiting my grandparents, who lived on a small coastal island on the Gulf of Mexico. Grandaddy's yard was his pride and joy. He had just bought a brand new riding lawn mower- his first ever- to cut his thick St Augustine grass. The mower was a beauty, sleekly built and a lustrous red. Everyone else saw it as a riding mower, but to me- in my pre-driver's-license days- it was a chariot, a Corvette, a Lamborghini, begging to be taken for a spin.

I was overjoyed when Grandaddy agreed to teach me to ride the mower after he returned from fishing, but he warned me not to touch it until then, when he could show me every safety precaution. However, when he left, he made the mistake of leaving the keys in the mower's ignition. I don't need to tell you that it wasn't too long before I found myself sitting on the mower's molded leather seat, making sound effects, pretending to drive the Dawtona 500. After a while, I noticed the key and before I could stop myself- before I could think reasonably- I cranked the engine. V-A-R-O-O-M!

My plan was to turn it on just for a moment, to feel the roar and thrust of the throttle, but for some reason the mover was in gear and started forward with a mighty jerk. Unprepared, I lost my balance, barely hanging on. The mower surged ahead, circling crazily around the yard, bits of St. Augustine grass flying behind me. I gripped the steering wheel and yelled like a maniac. In my panic, I couldn't remember how to stop the mower or slow it down. I continued to circle the yard, full speed ahead, cutting deep, irregular swaths of grass. No one was home to help me or hear my shrieks of terror. I lost track of how many times I circled, bumping over tree roots and gopher holes.

Finally, in desperation, I drove down the unpaved road that led to Grandaddy's fishing spot. Billows of powdery dirt rose up behind me in a huge cloud, announcing my approaching arrival. To this day I can still see him running towards me, a look of disbelief on his face, mouth open, shouting things I could not hear over the roar of the engine. Grandaddy shut off the mower and growled, " Have you lost your mind?"

I've since learned not to touch things that aren't mine!